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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 ASMARA 000370

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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E
LONDON AND PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

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SUBJECT: VIEWS OF AN ERITREAN OPPOSITION LEADER

REF: ASMARA 345

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reason 1.4 (d)

11. (S/NF) SUMMARY: The two senior Eritrean opposition figures in Asmara are both wealthy businessmen, one of whom is a prominent ex-fighter and the husband of a cabinet minister. Both are sympathetic to the Addis Ababa-based Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA). In their view, the regime is united by patriotism, communist ideology, fear, and personal greed. Ex-fighters now in the bureaucracy, military personnel, and many poor people are reportedly fed up with Isaias' despotic rule, but are fearful of being the first to raise a voice in opposition. Economic hardships have driven poor families almost to the breaking point; two months of severe electricity cuts could spur many people to openly oppose the status quo. Muslim Eritreans, incited by foreign Islamists, feel particularly oppressed. A leading oppositionist urges the USG to provide financial and technical support to Television Dehai ("Message"), the EDA television program beamed into Eritrea on satellite TV. End Summary.

12. (S/NF) WEAK OPPOSITION

The ambassador met July 21 with an Eritrean dual-national businessman who is resident in Asmara five months a year. He spoke openly of his opposition to Isaias and his affiliation with the EDA. He said the other senior civilian opposition figure owns a marble factory and is a respected ex-fighter. ("Ex-fighters" are veterans of the 30-year independence war and are accorded special status by the regime and society.) The other leader is married to a hard-line cabinet minister, although the marriage is apparently not a close one. The businessman, the main source of reftel, said the EDA is marked by bickering, particularly between factions of the former, mostly Muslim, Eritrean Liberation Front and the others. He said EDA structures and activities inside Asmara are practically nonexistent.

13. (C) WHAT HOLDS THE REGIME TOGETHER?

Patriotism, communism, fear, and greed bind the regime's top leaders, the businessman reported. All Eritreans, including the regime's leaders, love their country and have made huge personal sacrifices to achieve and maintain its independence,

he said. Accordingly, he continued, most Eritreans would bear any price to keep their country from being taken over again by Ethiopia. Isaias and key officials supposedly remain dedicated to a version of communism exemplified by Enver Hoxa's Albania or the Maoism of the 1960s. Isaias is said to be thin-skinned and quick to take umbrage at real or perceived slights, with often severe consequences for those suspected of being disloyal. Despite the regime's strong egalitarianism, it provides army, government, and party officials expropriated houses and business opportunities. Colonels and above, he said, are given nationalized houses, but the recipients cannot sell or bequeath the property to anyone. Regime insiders and their families can thus enjoy a lifestyle otherwise unsupportable by their meager official salaries*but only so long as they remain in Isaias' good graces.

14. (C) SQUEAKING PIPS

Most Eritrean families are barely making ends meet, as nearly all young adults are in the army or doing open-ended National Service for starvation wages. Fuel for cooking and transportation remains in critically short supply and candles, bread, sugar, and other staples are scarce. Electricity is surprisingly dependable; the businessman said that prolonged electric cuts (such as those announced June 26 but later rescinded) could prove to be the last straw for many long-suffering Eritreans.

15. (S) DEFENDING THE VISION OF 1993

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The businessman met recently with disgruntled officials who felt the ideals and aspirations Eritreans held at independence (i.e., hope for a prosperous and peaceful democracy) have been undermined by Isaias. Some military officers, prominent ex-fighters, and a number of government officials are reportedly worried that Isaias is so weakening the country that the most important gains since 1993, national unity and independence, are jeopardized. The age-old split between Christian highlanders and Muslim lowlanders could threaten national unity, according to these concerned officials, as the regime's particularly heavy-handed treatment of Muslims has enhanced the appeal of radical Islamists. Isaias' meddling in regional conflicts could cause Ethiopia to lower the boom on Eritrea, with unpredictable consequences for national unity and independence, he added.

16. (S) WHAT CAN THE USG DO TO HELP?

The USG, particularly the State Department, is so despised by the regime that any high-profile attempt to support human rights and democracy inside Eritrea will be strongly opposed by the regime, according to this source. He suggested that the U.S. seek ways to improve the "disappointing" opposition Television Dehai ("Message"). Television Dehai is on between 10:00 and 10:30 p.m. four nights per week on the Ethiopian channel of ArabSat satellite television. While the opposition programming has improved a bit since its dismal launch, it still is very amateurish and not nearly as influential or widely viewed as was hoped, the businessman stated.

17. (S/NF) COMMENT: The opposition businessmen and their circle of grousing functionaries are by no means revolutionaries; they seek to cement the gains made by Eritrea over the past decades and to foster a lawful, hopeful, and democratic country as enshrined in the unimplemented Eritrean constitution. They are not going to provide the spark that sets off the Eritrean tinderbox, but they may be able to exert positive influence should there be

a new line-up in Asmara. In their view, the threat to the country comes from Isaias' extraordinarily bad governance. The businessman expressed real concern of growing Muslim radicalism, as many young Muslims see the Asmara regime as Christian, oppressive, and anti-Muslim. Post concurs with the suggestion that the USG bolster Television Dehai, if it can be done opaquely or obliquely. End Comment.

MCMULLEN